

Principals Leading Toward a Vibrant Culture:

Getting “Off Their Backs” Leading “At Their Backs”

Why go this route?

- Because the leadership sets the tone in a school.
“The school leader holds the key to creating a caring community in which learning flourishes.”

**Joanne Rooney, “Principals Who Care: A Personal Reflection”
Educational Leadership, March, 2003.**

- Because the leadership establishes a model of behavior for staff and students.

“Nothing is more important about a school than its culture. No one occupies a more influential position from which to influence a school’s culture than its principal.”

—Roland Barth

- Because a positive culture encourages student achievement.
- Because coming to work is a joy when culture is positive.

You’ll know you’ve arrived when...

- Leader and staff both understand the leader’s style, recognize his/her strengths and compensate for the weaknesses.
- Staff members report feeling heard... and can point to times when their voices made a difference.
- Nearly all staff members have the experience of telling the leader what they need to excel at their jobs... and getting it.
- Competency (of many kinds) is recognized, affirmed and tapped on behalf of the whole.
- Staff meetings include rituals valued by staff members.

Construction Zone

- Undertaking this work requires being prepared to accept criticism and make personal changes.
- It will take time from other potentially good things. Make sure it’s an investment you’re prepared to keep up, if you start.



It’s about TIME

- This should be seen as a year-long commitment. Spread these tasks over the school year (If you’re using MI-Map Packet 1-5 “Organizing the School Year,” add these to your monthly checklists).
- The regular visits to classrooms for teacher conversations should occupy an hour several days a week.




Potential COSTS

- Possibly professional development on team building. Costs vary from \$500 to \$1500 a day.
- Incentives and appreciations for teachers and students. Perhaps \$200-400.
- Possibly professional development on understanding and respecting each others’ temperament and style. Costs will vary from \$500 to \$1500 a day.

The Process

*A step-by-step guide
to leading culture change
in your school*

NOTE: Steps marked with a  are accompanied by one or more inserts, included in this packet.

1 Get clear about your own style.

You'll be tempted to skip this, but we recommend reading Carol Pearson's [The Hero Within](#) or using MI-Map Packet 5:1 "Knowing Yourself As An Educator" to identify your own style or temperament. Being able to articulate both strengths and weaknesses helps set the tone for the kind of clear-eyed self-awareness you want from staff...and also gives them clear tips on how to work best with you.

2 Start by observing, listening and gathering information

before attempting changes to the climate/culture.

Use a blank floorplan to track your progress on having one-on-one conversations with each staff person. Notice what they want to talk about. Ask explicitly what they think of as doing "excellent work." Then ask what they need to move up a notch toward that. Listen for practical things you could make happen. Don't commit to them yet; just listen and make notes. But practical notes.

3 Survey staff to assess perceptions of culture/climate.

Consider organizing a Climate Committee to share decisions about guiding this work. MI-Map Packet 3:1 "Setting Up A Climate Committee" offers a process for doing that. But if other priorities preclude using a committee to help with this, use the survey in that packet yourself—as Instructional Leader—to invite staff members to speak to culture specifically.

4 Propose a set of "leader commitments" to staff and ask

which ones seem important to them.

Distill these options from your one-on-one conversations and from your reading of survey results, as well as your own experience and judgment. It's important that each one be something you're prepared to invest in and make good on... because you're going to take their choices as mandates, and there should be enough interesting alternatives to make those choices meaningful. Your question is: "Where among these good things should I start?" Pick 1 or 2 to start with. INSERT A for Step 4 includes some examples of strategies Michigan principals have used. INSERT B for Step 4 is a draft agenda for this staff meeting.

5 Keep the faith.

Having publicly committed to these strategies, your credibility and trustworthiness will depend on your ability to remember, maintain focus on them and deliver observable results. So take time to build a step-by-step plan for each one and add it to your monthly (weekly? daily?) To-Do list. The important thing is not a burst of activity, but sustained, substantive attention. Make a list of the other, individual "needs" teachers identified, and see how many can be fulfilled.

6 Consider school-wide initiatives.

INSERTS A–I for Step 6 describe ideas Michigan principals have found to be transformative. After you've built some credibility and trust, consider introducing one of these. Read INSERT I for Step 6 for creative ideas used in one school to change culture.

7 Consider rituals for staff meetings.

INSERT for Step 7 offers some short ways of re-focusing attention on "what's important here."

8 Share credit lavishly. Help others gain visibility.

Being the behind-the-scenes orchestrator of others' "showcases" is the role to aim for. It will pay dividends in eliciting everyone's best performance. Make opportunities to recognize and affirm real competence where you see it.

Getting more mileage from leading culture change

How building a vibrant culture benefits your school in regard to the following initiatives:

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

- NCLB's requirement for rapid, sustained improvement in student achievement can only be attained by creative, problem-solving teamwork among professionals who enjoy their work. Investing in building a "learning community" among staff may be one of the most powerful strategies underlying real change in practice and resulting in achievement gains.

Education YES!

- One kind of evidence of "Continuous Improvement" as an Indicator of Engagement is the degree to which staff functions as a collaborative team engaged in shared inquiry into their shared practices. The kind of culture change outlined in this packet is a pre-requisite toward shared inquiry.



Resources

Books

The Hero Within

Carol Pearson. Harper, San Francisco. 1998. 368-pg paperback, \$11.17 from Amazon.

Pearson describes six “archetypes” which run through human choices: Innocent, Orphan, Wanderer, Warrior, Martyr and Magician. The self-test we’ve included in the packet will point you toward one or more. Get the book to help you understand how people who’ve “grown that way” see the world and what they sometimes don’t see.

People

Specialists

Most Intermediate School Districts have a specialist working with schools on culture and climate in their service areas.

Coaches

The *Alliance for Building Capacity in Schools* website lists coaches whose training has been provided by Michigan State University and supported by the Michigan Department of Education. Some are active in working with school culture in Michigan schools. Please visit:

www.abcscoaches.org

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